Will The Real Teacher Please Stand Up?

I am two and a half feet tall, have a brittle bone condition called *osteogenesis imperfecta* and get around in a motorized wheelchair.

I have taught classes in English and Creative Writing at the college level for over 20 years.

My first class was Creative Writing for undergraduates at San Francisco State University in 1977. I was terrified about how the students would react to me. Would they even pay attention to me, given the fact that I was sitting and not standing? Would they ask me about my size or "deformities?" I confessed my terror to a good friend the night before the day of class. I told him I had written a speech — a mini lecture really — about my medical history in order to forestall possible awkward questions. "I'd be willing to bet," said my friend, "that you don't need that speech. You have natural stage presence — you're a "ham, "a born teacher. Once you get going, the students won't give a rat's ass what you look like." My friend was right.

I remember the hush of shock as I rolled into the classroom and up to the teacher's desk. To my amazement my fears instantly disappeared and I found myself saying "This is Creative Writing 101, so if you're enrolled in Nuclear Physics, History of Ancient Civilizations or Botany, you may leave the room. All you budding John Keats, Robert Frosts, James Baldwins, and Scott Fitzgeralds stick around." This got a laugh from the students and broke the ice and I felt I'd won them over right away. For many years, I used my sense of humor as a bridge to communicate with my students; I never, ever talked about my disability.

Then, in 1990, when I was teaching Freshman Composition classes at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan, the Office of Handicapped Students, as it was called then, organized a Disability Awareness Week. in the lobby the Disabled Students' Club put a tub filled with scraps of paper on each of which was written a different disability — blindness, hearing loss, wheelchair user and so on. Students and staff were invited to close their eyes, dip into the tub and select a disability. Whatever they picked they had to be for a week. The "blind" put on blindfolds, the "hearing impaired" put in ear-plugs, the wheelchair-bound were given manual wheelchairs donated by a local charity. Each newly "disabled" student was given an able-bodied guide to help them

to avoid unnecessary accidents, but the guides were instructed to encourage the student to be as independent as possible (when trying to read lips, figure out where doors were, negotiating access etc.).

At the end of the week the disabled students became "able-bodied" again and seminars and discussion groups were held to discuss the experiences of all concerned. Eighty percent of John Jay students participated in the project, but only five percent of the staff.

The only professors who took part were from the Psychology and Social Science departments. Even those who had not taken part said they had learned a lot and gained great insight into the experience of people with disabilities. I reluctantly declined to assume a second disability for safety reasons, though now, with several years "out of the disability closet" under my belt, I would probably have taken part. I was then still so self-conscious about having a disability and being different, that I was too scared to draw even further attention to my "otherness."

Ever since that week, whatever class I am teaching, I hold my own disability awareness week. Not only do I talk about my own disability, I have the students pick a disability and write an essay on what it would be like to have such a disability. I then invite high-functioning disabled friends and colleagues of mine to come to the class and share their experiences with the students. This way they can realize at first hand the difference between fantasy, projection and reality. I ask the students what they thought on the first day of class when I came rolling up to the teacher's desk in my chair. They invariably say that they didn't think I could be the teacher. "Oh," I reply "so people in wheelchairs can be students and not professors." This embarrasses them, but I persist. "Why would that be the case? I'm teaching English, not Mountaineering or Bungee-Jumping." There's that humor again, but the ice is already broken. I find I still don't need to give a prepared speech on my disability. I get my point across — "heh, I'm disabled, but that doesn't stop me being your teacher and a good one." In fact, by putting my cards on the table, the very thing that I was afraid would separate me from, and intimidate, my students, I now use to bring us all closer together through lively discussion and friendly conversation.

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